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THE RIGHT TO BELIEVE AT ONE'S OWN RISK.

I HAVE no intention in the present paper of going into the question of the ground or groundlessness of that much discussed doctrine pragmatism, nor have I the desire to enter the lists against anyone. But the expression used some years ago by Professor James in his well-known essay, namely, that "we have the right to believe at our own risk" hypotheses which tempt us, and the recent reiteration of the expression by Professor Dewey, have set me thinking a good deal about the freedom to act which seems to be offered us in the phrase; and what follows is a meditation upon this general topic.

Unquestionably the phrase is a taking one, and has been felt by many as an instrument of release from a certain bondage. It has seemed a justification, not merely of what men would like to do, but also of what the great majority of men actually do, and feel that they ought to do. Were it not for this, it would certainly not have taken the fancy of the public as it has. We all seek a justification of our course of life, and are glad when it appears that we have found one. The expression under discussion is not an idle phrase; it is full of significance, but the measure of its significance can scarcely be taken, until it has been subjected to critical reflection.

We are concerned with a right; and it seems desirable to determine, first of all, of what kind of a right we are speaking. Clearly we have not to do with a logical right. No man takes the trouble to establish the general proposition that we have a logical right to believe what can be proved to be true. We are supposed to be dealing with matters concerning which the logical right to believe cannot be established.

Nor have we to do with a legal right. The law allows us to believe what we please, so long as our words and actions are subjected to certain restraints. The words "at our own risk" cannot mean at the risk of detection and punishment at the hands of the law. Every crime that is committed is committed at the

risk of the criminal, but that does not establish his right to commit crime.

The right with which we are concerned is a moral right, and the real question which occupies us is : May a man regard himself as morally justified in accepting as true, and living by, views of the universe, or systems of doctrine and practice, which his critical intelligence cannot regard as scientifically established? And if we answer this question in the affirmative, it seems a plain duty to determine the limits of this right. It would seem silly to maintain that a man has a moral right to believe anything that he pleases, and to direct his life in harmony with such a belief.

I shall not haggle over the use of the word 'belief.' He who opens his eyes and looks about him must admit that men can and do place themselves in a receptive attitude toward systems of doctrine and practice without being impelled to do so by purely logical considerations. There are religious sects, there are political parties, there are social codes and prejudices, there are 'schools' in art, and even in philosophy. He who does not belong to any given division or class is constantly impressed by the effect of passion or prejudice in coloring the vision of those who belong to that class. Some who are thus classified appear to have no doubts. To some, the critical attitude appears to come now and then. A certain number seem to recognize rather clearly that they are where they are because they choose to be there, and to realize that their acquiescence is something more than a mere recognition of truth. If we use the word 'belief' rather broadly, I suppose we may say that all of these persons believe what they profess, openly or tacitly, to believe. Unless the critical consciousness is always awake and clearly awake, their attitude is one of receptivity. They feel and act *as if something were true*. The influence upon their lives may be enormous.

Now, I think that we would all feel that it is offering us, not liberty, but license, to tell us that we are morally justified in placing ourselves in any class we please for no better reason than that we please to do so. As a matter of fact, men who reflect upon such matters at all usually try to justify their position in

one way or in another. Usually they try to show that their subjective attitude is determined by objective truth. Sometimes they argue that their being where we find them is for the moral or spiritual good of themselves or of others. Occasionally social inertia, *i. e.*, family traditions, etc., may be brought forward as a sufficient excuse. Some excuse men commonly feel impelled to give. It impresses us as too loosely generous to maintain that we have the right to believe any hypothesis that tempts us; some limiting clause is demanded.

The statements brought forward for discussion in the opening paragraph of this paper stand in each case in a context which suggests that the right to believe, in the absence of convincing objective proofs, is founded upon and limited by considerations of utility alone. But, in each case, the statement seems to be softened and made a more cautious one, by the proviso that such belief is to be "at our own risk." The significance of this expression is worthy of investigation.

I believe that the limitation implied in this phrase has done a good deal to popularize the doctrine of the right to believe. It seems to make it a private and personal matter with which others have no concern. We all know that there are certain things that I may do at my own risk, that I may not do at the risk of my neighbor. Many of my acts concern him so little that neither the civil nor the moral law appears to require that I must consider him in their performance or non-performance. It cannot interest my neighbor to know which shoe I put on first in the morning, or whether I read the newspaper for ten minutes or for fifteen. It may even interest him little to know that I have over-eaten at dinner, and have suffered in consequence. The civil law certainly regards such an indiscretion as my own affair; nor does my conscience, under ordinary circumstances, accuse me of having wronged my neighbor in being guilty of it.

But even the law sets limits to my right to do things at my own risk. I am not allowed to take away my own life in peace, if the law can prevent it. In certain well-ordered communities the man who has been run over by a cab is fined, if it can be shown that he risked his life carelessly. As to the moral law,

my right to take risks is surely limited. I have no moral right to ruin myself mentally, morally, or physically, through a reckless disregard of what is prudent. So much I can say, even leaving my neighbor out of account. My moral right to do things at my own risk is a limited right; it extends only to certain actions.

Now, the statement that we have the right to believe at our own risk moved me favorably from the first, much as it has moved others. It seemed to be a formulation of the spirit of religious toleration, which is assuredly a good thing. And yet, also from the first, I had some doubts of the propriety of the limiting words "at our own risk," and these doubts have not been dispelled by time.

When we discuss the right to believe, with all that that implies, we are not concerned with trivial and unimportant matters. We have to do with matters of profound significance, both to our neighbors and to ourselves. No man can maintain that it makes no difference to the community in which I live whether I elect to be a Moslem, a Christian, a pillar of the Society for Ethical Culture, the founder of a peculiar sect of my own, or an avowed agnostic and an opponent of religious practices of every sort. As well say that it makes no difference to the community in which I live whether I have measles, smallpox, a sprained ankle, a taste for music, or a cold in the head.

And it seems to me equally clear that belief or unbelief in such matters as I am discussing must have so great an influence in determining the course of the life of the individual directly concerned, that we cannot consider it his moral right to act arbitrarily. If he cannot find a logical justification for belief, in the sense of the word used in this paper, surely he will, if he is a conscientious man, try to find some other justification. He will try to do what is *right*, here as elsewhere. The mere fact that some system of doctrine and practice tempts him, he will not regard as in itself a justification. Men are tempted in many ways, and some temptations are to be rejected.

I am inclined to think, therefore, that it is better to discard the words "at our own risk," and, recognizing the moral responsi-

bility to ourselves and to the community under which we all stand, to discuss the right to believe with a full consciousness of such responsibility. Whether we accept this view of the universe or that, this system of practice or that, is not merely our own affair. It is also the concern of our neighbor. And as far as it is our own affair, it is too serious a matter to be classed with the things that we may do or leave undone at our own risk.

When we have discarded the limiting phrase, I think a great deal can be said for the doctrine of the right to believe, provided it be somewhat cautiously defined. What appears to be at the bottom of the doctrine is that human life goes on on a basis of assumptions and conventions, and that we are always living beyond the limits of strict scientific evidence.

It is well to remember that this is true not merely in matters of religion. The law is as conservative as the church, and is full of conventions which the critical reason recognizes to be such. We keep up old forms from a consciousness of the danger of hasty changes in matters which so vitally affect the stability and the well-being of the body politic. We speak of 'interpreting' laws when our legal decisions are really making laws at every step. And in our everyday intercourse with our fellow men, and even with the members of our own family, we exercise a trust which is far beyond the limits recognized by the coldly critical intelligence which concerns itself only with objective evidence. Sometimes we come to grief as a consequence of such a trust. But human life would hardly be possible were men not thus uncritical in their daily living, and our gain exceeds our loss.

If, then, we come back to what is really in the mind of all of us when we take to discussing the right to believe, — if we come back to the religious beliefs, or to philosophical doctrines which, in the case of some men, take their place, — we find that we are not dealing with an isolated phenomenon. It is not too much to assert that men place themselves where they do, not merely under the compulsion of logical evidence, but for quite different reasons, among the most important of which are considerations of utility. These considerations may be rather selfish and trivial, or they may be quite the reverse of this. They may necessitate much self-denial and self-repression.

I have indicated above that philosophical doctrines may be the object of the will to believe. It is matter of common observation that there are such things as philosophical schools, and that those who have become inoculated in youth with a given type of doctrine show a certain readiness to accept, a certain eagerness to believe, many things that do not strike other men as either very significant or very well proven. There are philosophical movements at the present day which illustrate this admirably ; but, as I do not wish to be drawn into profitless dispute, I shall not mention them.

But the will to believe in things philosophical may be illustrated, not merely by a reference to those who have come under the influence of a given teacher, or to those who have taken up with a popular catch-word, but by a reference to men of a different class. I have lately been looking through the arguments for the Absolute, or, rather, for the several kinds of absolutes, urged upon our attention by a number of well-known philosophical writers. I confess that I cannot but marvel that men of such acuteness and learning should so solemnly offer us so sheer a non-entity ; and urge upon our attention proofs which, critically examined, are so little worthy of the name that, had they had the misfortune to get themselves recognized as traditional and orthodox, they would surely have been rejected with disdain by these same writers. Why do these men care a straw for such an Absolute ? And why are they willing to abandon all the canons of the ordinary logic when they argue in its defense ? I know no reason save that they are men like other men ; that this Absolute somehow takes for them the place of a God ; and that they do in their own way what is daily done by those who become devout Moslems or Christians.

The will to believe we find in almost every department of human activity ; and the right to believe I should myself be inclined to concede. In this I am guided partly by an observation of the instinct of the plain man. The right to believe seems to be almost universally demanded, and to have a close connection with the development of human life. But the important question is : How should this right be limited ?

I think the question can best be answered by having recourse to the ground upon which the right itself is established. If the development of the life of man seems to demand that he be allowed the right to go beyond objective evidence in accepting ideals and systems of practice, the limits of this right ought to be determined by a consideration of what is wholesome and helpful to the life of man.

This would rule out mere arbitrary choices, and choices dictated by petty considerations such as vanity, the desire to be regarded as original, the desire to shock sober people, to have one's fling, to pose as pious, etc. The question is a serious one: What is it desirable that men should accept and live by? How is human life best furthered?

Clifford once suggested, in youthful enthusiasm, that we ought to try new experiments in living, thus advocating an extreme independence and individualism. I wonder how it would strike the most independent of men if it were suggested that we all try experiments in manners, disregarding the usual methods of salutation, trivial conversation, and daily behavior, including our habits of taking food at the table? Conventions of some sort we all regard as necessary to civilized life. We must meet, if we are to meet without discomfort, on some common ground.

And men generally find themselves born into some sort of a religious system of doctrine and practice. It serves and it has served as a scaffolding by the aid of which man builds up his moral and spiritual life. To be sure, he may conclude, when he comes to years of discretion, that the particular system in which he has been born is a pernicious one, and has no good reason for existing. His duty, then, seems plain, though a painful one. But if the system serves his purpose, and if he can profitably use it, it seems a more natural thing to accept it than to accept some other for which little more can be said.

Man is guided by tradition and influenced by custom even in choosing his hat. Did he exercise a taste uninfluenced by these restraining influences, we should see on the streets a strange assortment of coverings for the head. And did men take up lightly with new systems of doctrine and practice, were the effect

of birth and tradition really of no effect, no religious organization would hold together for any length of time; not even a society for ethical culture, for men must hold to something with some degree of tenacity, and must be willing to overlook some of the differences of opinion which divide them, if they are to form any sort of a union.

If, then, we ask, What views is it desirable for a man to accept and to use in the regulation of his life? I think we may answer that that to which he has been born has at least a strong claim upon his consideration. Unless a man has good reason to move on, he would better stay where nature and the historical development of things have placed him. This does not mean that he is to reject all progress. When he sees clearly a new duty, he must obey its call. But mere restlessness, the impulsive tendency to throw off restraint,—such things as these may not be recognized as such a call. It is a good thing for man to realize that he has his place in the organism of society, and that progress in a society best takes place as the result of rather a slow evolution. There are instances in which progress seems to have been furthered by the presence of the revolutionary spirit in certain individuals at certain times, but revolution cannot be recommended as a prudent rule of life, and urged upon men generally as a duty.

The first of the provisional rules of morality which Descartes framed for himself, when he threw all his opinions into the crucible of his universal doubt, was to obey the laws and customs of his country, to remain in the religion in which he had been brought up, and, in general, to conform to the opinions of the more moderate party of those among whom he had to live. I think Descartes's action is very much to the point in our discussion. He stood just where we may assume those to stand who are discussing the will and the right to believe. Objective evidence was as yet lacking, and the question was: What, under such circumstances, was it wise to do?

I think I hear it objected that this is mere philistinism; and that men who follow tradition blindly and act with a smug prudence are in danger of killing off all freedom of thought and

action. There can be no doubt that Descartes's first rule, taken by itself, may be made the excuse for the worst sort of philistinism. But it is worthy of remark that it did not deaden independence of thought in the man who formulated it; and that it does not deaden independence of thought in many men at the present day, who feel it their duty to accord a general acceptance to religious or political organizations with all the details of whose creed they cannot feel themselves completely in accord.

There are men, plenty of them, who cannot make any distinction between what is voluntarily accepted as a rule of life, *i. e.*, an article of faith, and what is established as objective and scientific truth. But there are also men who can grasp the distinction, and who, while conscious of the difference, can use the article of faith to their advantage. If it furnishes them with what they can regard as a core of reasonable hope, they can overlook many things of lesser moment. I think this is what is actually done by many men who will to believe,—indeed, by the mass of men who will to believe at all consciously.

Such men stand between two contrasted dangers. On the one hand, they may keep alive the critical spirit at all times and seasons, in which case they cannot properly be said to will to believe at all, and they certainly lose any good that may be expected to come from the operation. There is no system of doctrine and practice which will not seem hollow and meaningless to a man who keeps saying to himself at every moment: "All this is moonshine; it is not really true at all; I am merely keeping up a pretense." This is not 'willing to believe'; it is 'willing to pretend.' Any emotional gain to the individual is out of the question; and an organization made up of such conscious pretenders has no real reason for being. If one is to gain by the operation we have been discussing, one must, at certain times and under certain circumstances, at least, give oneself up to the receptive attitude, and be uncritical even towards those elements in a system which, under other circumstances, one would be inclined to criticise.

The other danger to which I have referred is this: One may so far smother the critical spirit as to lose entirely the distinction

between objectively established truth and what has been voluntarily accepted as an article of belief. He who does this becomes a bigot, and a clog on the wheels of progress. It is natural to men of a certain type to be bigots,—theological bigots, philosophical bigots, political bigots, social bigots, bigots of every description. A philosophical justification may even be brought forward for such bigotry, and this has been done in the assertion, more than once urged upon our attention in recent years, that we are not bound to accept as truth what does not satisfy man's whole nature. If this only meant that, when in doubt, one may accept as an article of faith what seems helpful and is not palpably and fundamentally untrue, we cannot object to it. But those who have urged it have not, I think, had in mind such a limitation of their claim. They have obscured the distinction between what is subjectively accepted and what is objectively proven. They have treated truth as a thing to be *made*, not *found*. I think this is bad from every point of view.

It seems, then, that it is wise for a man to follow a middle course, and to accommodate himself to the world in which he finds himself, while allowing for growth and progress. He may make concessions to life, and yet remember that truth is truth and that blind bigotry is not a thing to be recommended, nor one that can be counted upon, in the long run, to bring him into harmony with his actual surroundings. The actual world is too big a thing to be ignored. It is what it is, and if we keep our eyes tightly closed we may clash with it.

But how far is it possible for a man to will to believe? Suppose that my critical intelligence cannot find in the world even a faint analogy that suggests the presence in it of something Divine. May I, then, join myself with any of the traditional religious organizations in the cultivation of the religious life? I have met men to whom it has seemed possible to do this. To me, I confess, the whole thing would seem so hollow that I could not find it possible. But I shall not permit myself to lay down limits to restrict the freedom of others.

One thing, however, I feel that I must do before closing. I must insist that the philosopher is not a creature apart, and a

being released from the obligations which rest upon men generally. That he should be more often engaged in critical analysis, more clearly conscious than other men of the distinction of subjective and objective, is a thing to be expected,—at any rate, it is a thing to be hoped for. But no one is merely a philosopher; he is also a man, with the usual endowment that makes man something more than a rational animal. He has read the history of philosophy to little profit who has not seen in the succession of systems unrolled before him plain traces of the education and training, the passions and prejudices, the hopes and fears, of their very human authors. The will to believe is unmistakably present. It seems reasonable to insist that the philosopher, since he is a man and a member in the social organism, should take this fact into consideration in ruling his own life,—should strive to avoid, on the one hand, the detachment from all that is human that rejects every ideal not completely supported by objective evidence, and to avoid, on the other, the blindness that assumes the objective truth of whatever may be the goal of his desire. To be sure, this sets the philosopher rather a difficult task; it asks him to embrace ideals, to care for them, to live by them, and yet be willing to abandon them in whole or in part, if there appears good reason for doing so. But this is, after all, only asking him to live by what light he has, while standing ready to welcome more light.

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